

Opening Statement of Chairman Joseph Lieberman
“Structuring National Security and Homeland Security at the White House”
Washington, DC
February 12, 2009

AS PREPARED FOR DELIVERY

In the wake of the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, Congress passed the Homeland Security Act of 2002, which not only created the Department of Homeland Security, but also formally established a Homeland Security Council – or HSC – within the Executive Office of the President. Before being codified in law, the HSC operated under an executive order issued a month after 9/11.

The HSC was established on the model of the National Security Council through an Executive order to advise the President on homeland security matters. Like the NSC, the HSC’s statutory direction is general and its required membership includes only the President, Vice President, Secretary of DHS, Attorney General, and Secretary of Defense. as served as the focal point for White House decision-making on homeland security issues, and represented a rough parallel to the National Security Council – or NSC – established by the National Security Act of 1947 to focus on policies related to national security. Just as the NSC is designed to corral the efforts of departments across the government, including Defense, State, and the Intelligence Community, in their operations abroad, the HSC was formed to

ensure that the government acts together in securing the homeland. In addition to DHS, several dozen other government agencies have a role in homeland security, and it is the HSC that is responsible for keeping them aligned with common strategies and unified policies.

A number of reports in the last three years have questioned the wisdom of a separate Homeland Security Council and National Security Council and argued they should be merged.

“Homeland security” is one element of the broader field of “national security,” proponents of a merger have argued. They say that in an era when threats are transnational and borderless, it does not make sense for the White House to split its organizational response and have separate councils for “domestic” and “international” security issues.

After the election of President Obama, several news stories indicated that the incoming Administration intended to merge the Homeland Security Council into the National Security Council. In early January, the President appointed John Brennan to serve as both a Deputy National Security Advisor for Counterterrorism and as Homeland Security Advisor, seeming to confirm these reports.

However, the *Washington Post* reported on Sunday that these plans for reform are a work in progress and, quoting Mr. Brennan, said the NSC is still

reviewing how it will ensure that – I quote – “homeland security matters, broadly defined, are going to get the attention they need from the White House.”

I have a great deal of confidence in the leadership abilities and professional competence of both Mr. Brennan and his boss at the National Security Council, Gen. James Jones, as well as of course Secretary Napolitano.

Going forward, it is vitally important that we get this right. And that is the reason for today’s hearing. I have several concerns over the implications of a merger that I hope will be addressed in any reform plan.

There is a risk that important homeland security issues, such as emergency preparedness and response, immigration and border security and infrastructure protection could receive diminished attention at the White House if they are placed within the National Security Council.

The NSC is already responsible for managing wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, coordinating global efforts to combat the jihadist terrorist threat, and addressing dozens of other important foreign policy, defense and intelligence issues. Within this broad portfolio, it is possible that homeland security issues could become lost in the crowd.

There is also a risk that state and local governments will find it more difficult to interact with the White House on homeland security issues in a merged HSC-NSC. Interaction with non-federal stakeholders is not in the historical “DNA” of the National Security Council, which has been traditionally dominated by the Department of State, Department of Defense, and CIA.

Homeland security policy-making is inherently a national responsibility rather than simply a federal responsibility, and requires coordination with state and local governments on a whole range of issues.

Given these concerns, I convened this hearing and invited this distinguished panel of witnesses with a broad range of perspectives on the issue of a merger and I look forward to their testimony.

I approach this issue with an open mind and deference to the President regarding the appropriate structure.

Every president since Harry Truman has adapted the structure of the National Security Council to best serve his needs and those of the country, in light of the challenges then facing the nation. President Obama, of course, will want to do the same – and with the Homeland Security Council as well.

But I have one clear bottom line – that whatever structure emerges, it is essential that homeland security policy issues are given sufficient staff,

resources, and attention within the White House and that a process exists to effectively coordinate them.

Where legislation is needed to effect those changes, I look forward to working with the President to improve the current structure.

Senator Collins.

Introductions

I am pleased that we have the nation's very first Homeland Security Advisor, Secretary Tom Ridge, with us to testify on this important matter. Secretary Ridge served in the White House from October 2001 to January 2003, at which point he was confirmed by the Senate as the nation's first Secretary of Homeland Security, and served in that position until January 2005.

Also with us today is the third person to serve in the role of Homeland Security Advisor, Fran Townsend, who served in that position from May 2004 to November 2007. Before becoming Homeland Security Advisor, Townsend served in a variety of positions at the Department of Justice and at the U.S. Coast Guard, and I look forward to her thoughts on these issues.

I am also pleased to welcome Christine Wormuth from the Center for Strategic and International Studies and Jim Locher from the Project on

National Security Reform. Both have published reports that address these issues within the last year, and have looked not only at the HSC-NSC issue but also the broader issues of how we should reform our national security institutions to meet the challenges of the 21st century.